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## Catholic-School Comeback?

*Inner-city kids would be the big winners.*

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Since Catholic education in America peaked in 1965, half of the nation's Catholic schools have shut their doors, with an average of 250 closing per year. Many of these schools have been in inner cities, making the closings a particularly tragic development for disadvantaged students, who've benefited tremendously from the orderly environment and first-rate instruction that these institutions provide and who now have no educational alternative but failing public schools.

The usual suspects for the school closings are the loss of religious teaching orders, demographic shifts, rising costs, and falling enrollments. The current economic crisis will push closings to epidemic proportions in the next few years, according to National Catholic Education Association president Karen Ristau. First to go, in even larger numbers, will be inner-city schools serving vulnerable populations, since they depend heavily on philanthropic and diocesan support. The Catholic school system might end up becoming an elite consortium for affluent Catholics.

Thus far, the Catholic response has been far from adequate. In fact, most bishops haven't even begun contemplating how to deal with the closings crisis comprehensively. Astoundingly, last May a Church official responded with indifference to Catholic philanthropists' proposal of a \$100 million national campaign to save parochial schools. The proposal eventually grew to \$1 billion but was shelved because of the weakening economy and the Church representative's discouraging reaction.

But hope remains. Some lay leaders and bishops have begun working together to effect local change that could apply across the country. In 1998, Memphis bishop J. Terry Steib boldly announced that he'd reopen eight inner-city schools serving a student population that was over 90 percent non-Catholic. But the diocese had no funds, and its bureaucracy was typically inefficient. "We were the problem," said Mary McDonald, the superintendent of Catholic schools in Memphis. "We had to move from a bureaucratic to an entrepreneurial way of thinking." And McDonald did. Instead of hitting up donors to cover deficits (the usual Catholic approach, which philanthropists find unattractive), she developed a fiscally sophisticated business plan. Seeing the Catholic schools as investments in Memphis's future—lowering drop-out rates significantly reduces crime rates and dependence on social services—foundations and local businessmen, mostly non-Catholic, responded by providing over \$70 million to date, enough for an endowment guaranteeing long-term survival.

Some other dioceses are finally developing strategic plans that aim to reestablish their schools' vitality. Like most big-city districts, those in New York have relied too heavily on wealthy donors, whose investment portfolios have shrunk considerably in the downturn. At the same time, job losses in a struggling economy prevent parents from paying rising tuitions. But a New York philanthropist has initiated a project, the Catholic Alumni Partnership (CAP), to track down elementary school alumni in several northeastern dioceses and solicit donations. If successful, CAP's backer will lend other dioceses funds to institute their own CAP programs.

In Wichita, Kansas, the emphasis is on "stewardship," the practice of involving all Catholics, which originally built the entire nexus of Catholic institutions. Wichita's parishioners agree to give "their time, talent, and treasure as the spiritual way of living Christian discipleship," explained Father John Lanzrath, Wichita's stewardship director. "Treasure" means 8 percent of parishioners' gross salaries, which support all diocesan ministries, including tuition-free schools. It took over 20 years to get all Wichita's parishes on board with the practice, since it applies whether or not a parish has a school or a family has school-age children. But the result is high-quality schools with strong Catholic identities that most Catholic children, rich and poor alike, attend. (It helps that 75 percent of Wichita's Catholics attend church regularly.)

Catholic colleges and universities are also stepping in, shouldering more responsibility with increased research and training of teachers and principals, as well as "adopting" nearby inner-city parochial schools—forming partnerships to improve their academic quality and helping with fund-raising. For the first time, the newly formed Catholic Higher Education Collaborative brings together elite Catholic universities like Boston College and Notre Dame to work on behalf of parochial schools.

Finally, the National Leadership Roundtable on Church Management (NLRCM) sends highly accomplished lay (and some Church) leaders in business, finance, academia, and philanthropy to consult with dioceses in crisis. These experts supply data-driven strategic planning on all diocesan managerial, financial, and human-resources issues. Consequently, though it is engaged in just 18 diocesan consultancies so far, NLRCM has become the leading organization with the sanction and potential to implement real change in Catholic education.

So amid the dreary news of school closings, some bright spots exist for Catholic education. The question now is whether enough bishops and their superintendents will adopt successful models before massive numbers of parochial schools close.

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